PROGRESS IN EUROPE IN IMPROVING TRANSPORT FOR PEOPLE WITH MOBILITY HANDICAPS

by

Jack Short
Deputy Secretary General

EUROPEAN CONFERENCE OF MINISTERS OF TRANSPORT

Towards Safety, Independence and Security

TRANSED 2001
9th International Conference on Mobility and Transport for Elderly and Disabled People

Warsaw (Poland), 2-5 July 2001

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not represent the views of ECMT or those of its Member countries.
Introduction

This paper gives some broad indications of progress and problems across the European Continent. It reviews briefly and selectively the present position, examines some current issues of debate and sets out a few ideas on how to move forward in Central and Eastern Europe.

I would like to make two general points at the outset.

The first is that Europe is not homogeneous. The Europe I am talking about, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, includes the rich countries of Western Europe, those from Central Europe hoping to accede soon to the European Union and the countries of the Balkans, the Caucasus and Russia and the former CIS.

This is over 40 Countries, with varying degrees of internal and external stability, with incomes per head varying from 1 to 20 and with cultural and ideological baggage that influences the approach and attitudes to disabled people and their mobility. Even within Western Europe or Central and Eastern Europe there are great variations. Thus, you will need to keep this in mind and I will make distinctions where possible.

The second general point, and this is important from a scientific viewpoint, is that there is no recognised method or benchmark for assessing progress. Attempts to do this in the past, for example in European Union questionnaires, have focussed on counting various physical indications of progress, like the number of low floor buses or dropped kerbs. We know now that this is totally inadequate and more integrated, holistic, broader methods are needed to assess progress.

Given this difficulty, I will assess progress under a number of different headings. No doubt this is something that can be worked on and improved greatly.

The headings are the legal framework, the policy approach, the attitudes and behaviour of key actors, the physical adaptations, the funding and the consultation and redress mechanisms.

Progress made

- Legal framework

Here, Europe has a different tradition especially compared to the United States. We tended to make progress through voluntary agreements, guidelines and codes of good practice rather than laws and litigation. However, the 1990s saw significant changes across Europe in the legal provisions affecting people with disabilities. Many Countries enacted anti-discrimination legislation, including several in this region like Poland, Romania, Hungary and Estonia. The UK introduced the Disability Discrimination Act in 1995, which takes a civil
rights approach. Many Countries have introduced specific regulations on means of transport: for example the UK regulations on access to trains were introduced in 1998. Sweden brought in regulations in 1998 requiring local authorities to improve local public transport for people with disabilities. More details on these changes can be found on ECMT's web site: www.oecd.org/cem/topics/handicaps/index.htm

To summarise, there has been in Europe in the last decade a significant move to introduce new legislation, both general anti-discrimination or civil rights type laws and specific regulations on access to the built environment and transport facilities to support the objective of achieving full integration of people with disabilities in all aspects of existence. Though it may be simplistic, it could be said that in Western Europe legislation has followed the changes in policy and approach, while in Eastern Europe legislation is more intended to lead the changes.

- **Policy Approach**

  The stated policies in almost all countries are for an inclusive and integrated approach to people with disabilities. This is true also at international level where we in ECMT and others have very many excellent policy statements. I cite two of ECMT's, but our web site contains some others.

  First, this approach is summarised in the comprehensive resolution that Ministers adopted in Lisbon just a few weeks ago. This brings together in one text, all the main political recommendations of ECMT over the last 15 years. This text summarises the main principles and policy objectives as agreed formally by the Countries. It exists in English and French but now also in Russian and in Polish.

  Second, one of the key principles is that the needs of people with disabilities are taken into account from the planning stage. This is enshrined in a Charter adopted by Ministers here in Warsaw in 1999, which says that public funding of transport should be conditional on providing access.

  The individual Countries have strong policy integration aims and some have taken concrete steps to reflect them. For example, Sweden, Finland and others are increasingly finding ways to integrate special services for disabled people and public transport. There has also been a strengthening of organisational structures to reflect the need to look at the entire transport chain. For example, France set up COLIAC, as a new unit within the Ministry of transport with responsibilities to look at the whole door to door journey. Similarly, the United Kingdom extended the powers of its consultative Committee DPTAC to look also at the built environment. In ECMT, we have decided to integrate the work on people with disabilities with that on ageing populations since many of the issues are common.

  But the broad picture shows that, in practice, structures in the transport sector and especially in the transport Ministries are far from adequate to correspond with the ambitious policy aims. The majority of countries still treat accessibility as a relatively low priority subject, and deal with it in isolation. The responsible officials in Ministries will usually have
many other dossiers to deal with and accessibility is, unfortunately, usually one of the least important.

**Attitudes of KeyActors**

This is important because operators can easily block or disrupt progress if they do not really believe in the aims. While the principle of integration is now widely accepted, it does not always translate into concrete support by key businesses in transport. Of course, operators do not usually refuse cooperation but they argue that the costs should all be paid by governments.

But there has been a significant breakthrough recently. The public transport operators, through their international organisation UITP, have just issued an encouragingly positive statement to replace their previous texts, which advocated separate specialised services for people with disabilities. This new text calls for shared efforts to solve the problems and accepts that partnerships with authorities can bring mutual benefits.

Another example concerns taxis where progress has been very slow. In a new attempt to move things along we have just completed a report together with the taxi profession, through its representative body the IRU, which discusses the economic implications of improving taxi access. This sets out a way forward here which also involves a sharing of responsibilities and roles. This report is also available on the ECMT web site:

www.oecd.org/cem/topics/handicaps/tphdocs.htm

To summarise, operators are gradually coming round to the view that accessibility is something that cannot be ignored and that they too have to contribute, even if they do not yet really believe that it can mean more business.

**Practical Changes (infrastructure and equipment)**

A visit to the UITP congress recently held in London showed the improvements that are being made to new public transport vehicles. Almost all buses, trams and light rail vehicles now have lower floors and the host of other improvements that we have been advocating for so long.

And these vehicles are finding their way onto the streets, quickly in countries like Germany, France, United Kingdom and others and more slowly in this region where funds are scarce. Terminals for rail, bus and air, when they are renewed or improved generally build in or improve access facilities. In general, the principle that new or upgraded facilities build in access is gradually being implemented.

Problems remain, especially with the many old installations we have. There are good examples of retro-fitting improvements (e.g. lifts, ramps) in underground systems, which bring specific lengths, but because the whole system is inaccessible, these improvements do not bring the full benefits that an accessible system would.
• Other Changes (services and information)

There is a far greater realization that physical improvements have to be accompanied by much better information to users. There have been many initiatives here and there are now a large number of brochures, guides and other information on accessible services.

In this region of Central and Eastern Europe, one of the main developments that is helping disabled people is specialised services. Since Public transport and the built environment are often not very accessible, there is little choice. In Lithuania, one of the biggest obstacles for disabled people is to get from their home. But in general, there is not much information on the nature or extent of these services, on their organisation or financing.

• Funding

It is difficult to get estimates of how much is spent on improving accessibility at national level. It is virtually impossible to compare funding between countries. There are several reasons. One is that it is difficult to identify funding as being specifically for accessibility; a second is that there are several sources of funding including different government departments, and different levels of government and private operators. There are well known facts, for example that the Nordic countries spend relatively more on services and concessions for people with disabilities than others; that Switzerland has spent heavily to improve rail access, Germany a lot on low floor buses and the Netherlands on facilities for blind and partially sighted people. In this region, there has been little funding for public transport in general and so improvements are slow, though there are some positive examples like here in Warsaw, where there are now many low floor buses.

• Consultation/Possibilities of Redress

In the last few years there have been general improvements in the systems of consultation with people with disabilities. Many Countries now have systematic forms of such consultation. There are different models and they are described in more detail in an ECMT document, which is on the net:

www.oecd.org/cem/topics/handicaps/tphdocs.htm

These procedures usually have a consultative purpose and are non-binding.

However, redress mechanisms are much less developed in Europe than in the United States and Canada. Few European countries have organised complaint procedures for people with disabilities and this is undoubtedly an area that needs to be developed in the future.
Some lessons and issues

Following from the above I would like to highlight some lessons we have learned and some issues that we are trying to come to terms with.

Countries have increasingly realised that improving access is complex, involving a need to take actions on a number of fronts simultaneously. This can appear frustrating because it makes the task seem so immense.

For example, we know that legislation by itself is not enough. Its aims need to be supported by key actors, and it also needs to be monitored and enforced. Physical improvements like low floor buses are not enough. They need to be supported by better bus stop and street access. More generally, we still need to work to evaluate critical changes that are needed and the effectiveness of some of the measures that we have introduced.

The funding discussion is permanent and frequently depressing. Operators argue that they are working in a commercial environment where all extra costs have to be justified by extra revenues; they do not believe that the extra costs bring in enough extra revenue. Governments contribute what they can but it is usually not enough and they also argue that the responsibility is with the operator. This situation leads to deadlock and we have to break it. One way to start to break it is to refuse to accept the arguments that the extra costs are for a tiny proportion of the population and argue that the benefits are shared over a much wider base. We also need to develop models of sharing the costs by convincing operators that there are also benefits. It often forgotten that, while there are costs associated with making transport more accessible, there are also costs associated with inaccessible transport.

The role of specialised services is an important issue. Several of the more advanced countries especially the Nordic Countries are looking for closer integration of main line and specialised services and reductions in the quantity and cost of specialised services. But in other places, and in particular in this region, there are not many alternatives and the development of specialised services would seem to be essential in the short term.

Ways forward in Central Europe

There is so much to be done that it would be easy to feel overwhelmed. We should not let this happen because the issue will become more important in the request for both demographic and political reasons. There is an important opportunity here that will be discussed in more depth during the Conference. The following suggestions are given as a contribution to this discussion.
• **Talk less about the lack of money**

Finance is a problem but we should not let that result in paralysis. First, it is not entirely true; there is money. Look at all the airports being built in the region. Here, it is absolutely necessary to monitor investment plans and make sure the renovations, upgradings and developments **design** in accessibility. The ECMT Charter on this adopted by Ministers in Warsaw is the political guarantee that this is supported. Make sure it is applied.

Second, much can be done cheaply and there are many examples of this from different member countries.

Third, the campaign to get resources must go on, not using narrow arguments about wheelchair accessibility, but broader ones aimed at improving access for all.

• **Learn from the good and bad things that others have done**

If your country has not yet done so, join the ECMT working Group. One of the particular features of this work is that countries admit to mistakes and are prepared to learn from them. Use the Guide to Good Practice published by ECMT ("Improving Transport for People with Mobility Handicaps").

• **Use the political process**

Politicians, Ministers and Senior Civil Servants need to realise that initiatives in this area can bring political credit. Once they are convinced of this they may be prepared to do more. The political commitments exist in the texts I have mentioned. Politicians need to be reminded of these commitments and pushed to take responsibility for implementation.

• **Engage the key actors in discussions / negotiations**

As said above, operators and manufacturers need to be involved in all these discussions. Their practical concerns need to be discussed and dealt with (e.g. loss of seats in vehicles and changes of potential revenue, loss of time). Partnerships can be formed, based on mutual interest.

• **Strengthen the Ministries’ support for the policy aims**

One way to do this that is not expensive, is to put dedicated, clever, hard working people on the subject. There is a lot of experience to show that in countries where dynamic people are in charge of this subject, improvements happen. In this area, it is too often added to someone's list of responsibilities as a sort of miscellaneous category. Do not do this. Make it a core part of broad policy development with the aim of improving access for everyone.
**Conclusion**

There is so much to be done across Europe. Progress is being made but it is uneven and is too dependent on a small number of committed individuals, especially in Central and Eastern Europe. We do not ask that the subject become a priority. We need instead to simply make sure that work on accessibility is integrated into core policy work. Just as for the people concerned, we do not want the work to be segregated or marginalised. Integration of people with disabilities requires also integration of the work and approach into policy and structures.

*********************

**ECMT References**

(all available on web site: www.oecd.org/cem/topics/handicaps/tphdocs.htm)

- Consolidated Resolution No 2001/3 on Accessible Transport (available in English, French, Polish and Russian) CEMT/CM(2001)15/FINAL
- Legislation to Improve Access CEMT/CS/TPH(2000)7/REV1
- Consultative Arrangements CEMT/CS/TPH(2000)8/REV1
- Charter on Access to Transport Services and Infrastructure (Warsaw 1999)
- Improving Transport for People with Mobility Handicaps. A Guide to Good Practice, 1999